

Introduction

In The Public and its Problems (1927), John Dewey expresses caution about vocations leading to a ‘conventionalised and routine consciousness’ (184). Later, in Art as Experience (1980), Dewey develops this idea by exploring the aesthetic and the anaesthetic; experiences essential to being ‘fully alive’ and experiences where there are: ‘beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations or conclusions. One thing replaces another but does not absorb it or carry it on’ (40). Dewey’s comments help to foreground the kinds of vocational experiences teachers have at work which can influence their learning.

This exploratory case study considers the pedagogic and cultural role of practitioner research (PR) in teacher learning. PR is defined here as an investigation of practice, carried out by practitioners, usually ‘with a view to evaluation or improvement’. (Campbell and McNamara 2012 p.24). We wanted to know more about how teachers saw pedagogic change taking place, how they felt about practitioner research, and how innovation might be led. We were particularly interested in how social interactions and collegiality might work to enhance teacher learning.

Our research is broadly influenced by Vygotsky’s recognition that learning has its origins in social sources. We value the importance of the ‘socially and culturally shaped contexts’ (Palincsar, 2005 p.293) fundamental to learning and believe that there is ‘no generic development that is independent of communities and their practices’. (Palincsar, 2005 p.293). Our resistance to ‘generic development’ is effectively outlined by Giddens’ comment that ‘the equation of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived’ (Giddens 1990, p39). With these fundamental positions in mind, we acknowledge that teacher learning and the consequent hope of improving learner outcomes is not a simple cause and effect process. As Gardener (2011) has commented:

Conclusions from educational research rarely achieve the succinctness of the action-related messages from medicine and science, e.g. Drink less beer or Use low energy light bulbs. (552)

In a similar vein, Watson (2013) observes that strategic decisions in schools take place in a ‘context of uncertainty’ (p.256) and whilst, we agree with Timperley et al (2009) and Stoll et al (NCSL 2012) that the purpose of teacher learning is fundamentally to improve outcomes for learners, there is still ‘a temptation to reduce the complexity and rationalise the situation’ (Watson 2013, p.256), possibly leading to short term gains but longer term problems. This has been the criticism of ‘professional learning communities’ (see for example Hargreaves, 1994 and Stoll and Louis, 2007) which our work might be compared to. However, Watson’s (2014) valuable critique of professional learning communities, challenges the tendency toward ‘de-problematization’ (18) of complex

concepts in the field. This is an important cautionary note, warning against a ‘narrowly instrumental or technicist agenda’ (27) of teacher development. We agree with Priestley et al (2011, p.281) that because the process of teacher change is complex and relational, this should encourage more research, not deter or reduce our thinking to false certainties. Valuable, broader cultural factors that could actively enhance teacher learning such as trust, openness and honesty (all endorsed by Maxwell et al (NCTL, 2015) and Nelson et al (NCTL, 2015), are complex and uncertain and as such, worthy of qualitative and rich exploration.

Teacher Learning, Practitioner Research and Collegiality

Teacher learning through practitioner research (PR) has been a subject of debate for decades. Elliot (2004) captures the nature of the PR movement in the following way: ‘teachers as active participants working alongside academic researchers to actively construct useful knowledge’ (266). This movement has evolved into a powerful endorsement of the contribution teachers can make to creating new pedagogic knowledge. For example, Halsall (1998), Middlewood et al, (1999) and Darling-Hammond, (2006) frame PR as a context for organisational improvement. Cochran-Smith and Lytle, (1998) explore PR as a challenge to the existing knowledge base. Fernandez and Yoshida, (2004) and Judith Warren Little, (2002) consider PR from the perspective of enhanced collegiality and Zeichner (2003) discusses findings from the USA suggesting teachers involved in PR experience a rekindling of excitement and enthusiasm about their work. This affective perspective is strongly linked to the positive identity shifts Goodnough (2011) has noted in teachers as a result of PR namely: enhanced confidence; increasing levels of self-efficacy; seeing learners more holistically and becoming more attuned to their learning needs. Wilkins (2011) rightly suggests this growing acknowledgement of the role of PR in teacher learning is as much about the impact on the practitioner researchers themselves, as the impact of the PR itself. Important to this point is Brown and Zhang’s (2016) comment that the experience of ‘research engaged schools’ is that research engagement can shift school behaviours from the superficial to ‘a learning culture in which staff work together to understand what appears to work and why’ (781). This comment touches the interdependence of PR with collegiality, defined by Halsall (1998) as ‘mutual assistance, joint work and sharing’ (30). Halsall (1998) also refers to the role of PR in the development of voluntary and cooperative collaboration on school culture and refers to Stoll and Fink’s (1996) endorsement of collegiality as one of the two most important underpinning factors in school development. Collegiality is sometimes an over-used term, open to interpretation as Hargreaves (1993) has pointed out and perhaps charged with too many claims to success (See Shah, 2012 for example) which can obscure its primary significance. Hargreaves’ (1994) collaborative and contrived forms present a more balanced approach and work well alongside Harris and Anthony’s (2001) work where two types of collegiality are defined: emotionally

supportive collegiality and collegial interaction. The first refers to open communication, listening to ideas and a respect for each other's work; the second is regarded as more influential, involving deeper, personal collaborations between colleagues who share values, goals and visions about teaching:

For colleagues to truly 'collaborate' and take ownership of the process of inquiry together, they need to have some shared values, goals and/or a common vision of teaching. They must have a relationship that is characterised by trust, care and mutual respect (384)

In summary then, practitioner researchers can positively influence not just themselves and those in their immediate purview, but whole school culture too by acting as a driver for the development of collegiality as identified by Harris and Anthony's comment above. This is of course not easy or straightforward. As Halsall (1998) points out, collegiality 'does not simply emerge from nowhere' but by the 'proclivities of the staff themselves' and 'the deliberate creation of structures that support the work of teachers' (30). These areas are the main concerns of this research.

[The Research Setting](#)

The setting for this research is Wood Green Academy, a mixed 11-19 Community Comprehensive school in Wednesbury, part of the West Midlands of England. Wood Green is a National Teaching School (NTS), and so part of a UK government policy, central to what is called the 'school-led system' for the training and development of both new and existing teachers. An important strand of this status is research and development work. At Wood Green, this aspect of teaching school status is primarily the responsibility of the Innovation Unit (IU). The IU has been in operation since 2005, therefore preceding the UK introduction of teaching school status, which began in 2011. The IU recruits members voluntarily through an expression of interest on a yearly basis. Interest comes from teaching staff who are committed to working with colleagues on pedagogic innovation. More specifically IU teachers have three key functions: firstly, to offer weekly open lessons for colleagues to observe, evaluate, and adapt. Secondly, they contribute to various working parties by suggesting innovative pedagogic practices to support developments in areas such as eLearning, SEND, raising boys' achievement and marking and feedback. The third function is the completion of a practitioner research project linked to one of the school's priority areas for that academic year. These projects often evolve into articles for the school's in-house teaching and learning journal. It is this aspect of the IU we will focus on.

Notwithstanding the comments above about the potential of PR, most teaching schools have not found progress in PR easy as a mandatory requirement, especially where there is no history of PR activity. A Department for Education evaluation of teaching schools in 2015 by Gu et al, commented that the challenges to date:

.... have been securing the time and involvement from other schools (including the active involvement of class teachers), accessing academic journals and papers, accessing materials about what other teaching schools are doing and getting involved in national R&D activity. Senior leaders in some schools still find it difficult to engage with the R&D agenda. Achieving a school-wide and alliance-wide understanding of research in a school context is still to be developed in the majority of case study alliances. (p.218)

Capacity and expertise issues have frequently been cited as problems for schools. For example, Maxwell et al (NCSL, 2015) report that instability in staffing and embeddedness of research were both challenging aspects of research and development and regarded by the NCSL as ‘underdeveloped’ (8). In the same document, Maxwell et al also comment that partnerships with universities would be beneficial (8-9). More broadly, Woods and Simkins, (2014) note the lack of detailed, critical, research into teaching schools since 2011. Despite these challenges nationally, Wood Green’s Ofsted Report (2012) identified the IU as a key strength, raising and developing the quality of teaching. The report also acknowledged the role the IU plays in creating an environment where discussion about learning is highly valued. The Ofsted report is not the final word on the issue, but it does suggest there is value in Wood Green’s approach.

The IU research projects (the crucial aspect of PR at Wood Green) begin with broad and open discussions which include the university partner. IU members soon settle on a subject area to explore that falls into a broad school strategic priority. Though this does broadly restrict what teachers research, the priorities (‘e-learning’ and ‘feedback’ for example) are interpreted with considerable flexibility. Once IU members finalise the research area, they outline exploratory research questions and begin their work. IU members receive additional pay for their role but no teaching reduction so the pressures are significant; we will return to this issue later. The projects usually involve a class activity or intervention and are always underpinned by wider reading and data collection. The writing process is guided by the IU co-ordinator and the University partner to broadly follow a traditional academic journal article format, though only around 3,000 words. The articles play an important role in the pedagogic learning culture of the school and become important to other internal school structures where innovative ideas are sought out. The project articles are designed to encourage scholarship across the school and have developed into a catalogue of exemplar work for others to follow or challenge. The two extracts below illustrate how IU members typically synthesise wider reading with data gathered within the setting, with clear potential pedagogic outcomes. In the first extract for example, the IU member works with wider reading to set a context for a project:

Bergmann and Sams (2012), pioneers of the Flip movement comment: “Flipping the classroom establishes a framework that ensures students receive a personalized education tailored to their individual needs’. Additionally, McNutt (2013) says: “since teenagers spend an increasing amount of time interfacing with audio, visual and textual information on a daily basis, through the technologies of television, video games, and computers, it is prudent of educators to employ such communication tools to benefit their students.”

In the second example, the IU member draws out conclusions intended to form the possibility of pedagogic change for colleagues:

In light of these results, it would be beneficial to use hand held video cameras on a larger scale for coaching in PE. There are broader uses of video technology too that emerged from this project. Even when there was no specific coaching agenda, pupils had the opportunity to observe each other and themselves. This supported their analytical skills and also began to develop closer working relationships between peers. In turn, this could help to develop pupils holistically through the use of transferable skills.

These brief examples evidence ways in which the projects avoid some of the common pitfalls of PR such as superficial hints and tips for example (Brown and Zhang, 2016). Our research explores how this work is developed and mediated in the school and attempts to uncover how teachers' social interactions around these projects (and around the work of the IU in general) can lead to further teacher learning.

Research Design

Methodology

The methodology we adopt follows on from Giddens's (1990) comment above about knowledge and certainty. This chimes with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) comment about avoiding the 'illusion of causality' (184-5); they develop from this, the notion of 'wakefulness' (184) - a concept important to our research in its call to be alert, questioning, iterative and reflexive. What broadly unites these positions in this paper is Interpretivist Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Smith et al (2009) summarise IPA as: 'detailed, nuanced analyses of particular instances of lived experience' (37) with a focus on personal meaning and sense-making. In common with many IPA approaches, we chose in-depth interviews as our primary method of data collection. This was the most effective way available to us to access teachers' lived experiences. We make no claims to 'neutral' interviewing which is rightly critiqued in qualitative methodological writing. Both researchers for this paper have existing and varying professional relationships with the participants so to increase the trustworthiness of our data we endorse 'acquaintance interviews' as outlined by Garton and Copeland (2010) where explicitness about the role prior relationships may play in the process of data generation is important, as is: 'a focus on reflexivity in the analysis of the construction of the interview itself and to a consideration of how the data is generated as a result of previous relationships' (548). We questioned the involvement of the IU Co-ordinator because the participants were directed by her for their PR work. Gubrium and Holstein (2003) importantly raise the issue of power relationships: '...how does power, as it percolates across the social statuses of interviewer and respondent, relate to what is and isn't said in interviews? (p.27). We decided that because the relationship was not functional and not part of a line management structure that we could still expect data to be open and honest. We also judged the IU

Coordinator's relationship with the participants to be friendly and informal so though we could have been wrong in this assessment, we still felt it was better to include her in the research because of her historical and current knowledge of the IU. Secondly our view was that the participants involved were enthusiastic and ethically mature educationalists, and very able to make valuable contributions. We also had to be open and honest about anonymity. Part of our process of seeking voluntary informed consent from participants included a frank statement that though we would not identify participants, there was a strong chance they could be identified by our need to profile participants and through the detail of their comments. It is probably the case that researchers in schools often face this challenge because education communities are sensitive to the nuances of colleagues' personalities and working roles. Participants saw the possibility of being identified but were still willing to be involved particularly because we reassured them they would see a final draft of the paper. Of course, being identifiable could have affected the conversations participants were willing to have, possibly compromising the openness of their responses. But again, we felt it was still important to progress with this possibility in mind. We raise these questions in the spirit of 'wakefulness' mentioned above and at the same time we celebrate Alvesson and Skoldberg's 'dynamism of reconstruction' (318) that comes from the words of our participants and aim to remain vigilant to the challenges and opportunities in interviewing.

Participants, Methods and Interpretation.

Returning to Garton and Copeland's (2010) comment on 'acquaintance interviews', we begin this section with an outline of who our participants are and the role prior relationships may have played in the process of data collection. The participants were 6 teachers (all names have been anonymised) involved in the IU and one member of the school senior management team (SMT). We requested the participation of members who had completed one or more research projects in the past two years to gain some historical and reflective expertise. We invited an SMT member to take part after the 6 teacher interviews to reflect on some of the initial findings from the 6 teachers. This offered us an opportunity to explore, validate and question our data. We sought and gained ethical clearance from the participants themselves (via voluntary informed consent forms) and both the partner university and the school.

The research process was in three stages:

Stage One: Basic participant Self profiling (see below);

Stage Two: one to one interviews with 6 IU members and initial analysis;

Stage Three: interview with 1 senior management team member.

The table below profiles each participant in Stage One. We requested a short narrative description of events that impacted positively on their learning as teachers. This was an open and unguided activity, designed to initiate participants' thinking and to explore ideas that could help us to focus questions for Stage Two:

Stage One Self-Profiling			
Teacher	Years teaching	Responsibilities in school	Narrative themes
Steve	4	IU and Deputy SENCO	Positive change as a result of research and uses of technology
Frances	4	IU and KS3 manager in English	Learning from others, sharing and trainee mentoring
Hamida	15	IU	Research, excellence and learning from others
Jackie	13	IU and Head of Biology	Emotional reactions to learning, sharing and 'performance'
Sue	6	IU	Learning from feedback and designing feedback to others
David	15	IU and Head of eLearning	Behaviour, community and technology

Stage Two involved the interviews themselves (conducted by the University partner) which took place over two weeks followed by an initial analysis of the transcripts to inform Stage Three. Data from all seven participants was then explored collectively through the weaving of their narratives under emergent themes (see Ely,1991).

Findings

Findings fell into two themes: firstly, the influence of practitioner research; and secondly, leadership and collegiality.

Teacher Learning - The Influence of Practitioner Research

All seven interviewees were positive and committed to PR and the role it played in school and beyond. They were enthusiastic, but realistic too about the demands made on them by PR and were clear about its influence in two directions: firstly, the influence on their identities, (particularly as practitioner researchers) and secondly the significance of their research beyond themselves in the school and the wider educational community.

Increased confidence was the clearest overall impact of PR on the participants. Jackie comments that 'reading up' about her Project increased her confidence to work with colleagues and Sue confirmed that PR challenged her 'everyday practice' (23). She felt that reading and writing around a pedagogic issue led to a growing sense of expertise. David mentioned that 'I've got the confidence because I've done the research'. Frances also experienced a clear boost in confidence because she knew that other teachers' day to day working lives did not include an opportunity to prioritise research; this meant she 'had something to say', some uniqueness that acted as a driver for engagement with other colleagues - this clearly shifted the way she saw herself at work. A similar shift was noted by Steve who suggested that practitioner research subverted the 'just a teacher' stereotype by altering how he was seen by others in the school. Additional identity shifts were touched on by

Sue who felt that practitioner research made her feel she was ‘in possession of something that could support the whole department’ (24). Tom (the SMT member) endorsed all of these feelings: ‘They [members of the IU] feel more confident because they can say why something is good, how it might work’. These comments evidence a trend amongst all the participants: a knowingness of the powerful influence of PR, where school based evidence explored in light of wider reading, brought in possible ways forward from a wider academic community. The power in this further dimension to the ways they felt about themselves, helped to transcend the notion of ‘just a teacher’; the evidence being in the common experience they had of being ‘recognised’ in the school as colleagues with particular expertise. Our participants were not rampant education careerists, self-publicising at every opportunity, but they were aware of how striking and stimulating it was in the school community to create competent research-based ideas that carried credit and esteem through the innovative support they offered to colleagues. Evidence for this was packaged by the participants in different ways. For example, Steve comments that being involved with PR ‘helped me raise my profile’ and ‘gave me ...another string to my bow’. Sue saw it partly as ‘highlighting yourself’ because she wanted to ‘be offered and asked to do things’. There was a tendency (probably common amongst committed and enthusiastic teachers) to challenge themselves and be adventurous in their working lives and PR became a vehicle for this. However, what was equally significant to them, was the need to be seen by others as competent practitioner researchers but also valuable teacher innovators within the school. We have already noted Frances’ comment about ‘expertise’ being important to shifting teacher identities. In addition, David commented that ‘it [practitioner research] makes you an expert in the thing that you’re trying to do.... I think that helps with confidence, that there’s a method to what I’m actually doing’. By associating PR with ‘method’, David puts PR in the powerful position of validating his pedagogic activity. At the same time, through his project article, David’s colleagues are in turn, encouraged to reflect on their own teaching through the scholarly underpinning of his PR. Jackie develops another dimension to this, commenting: ‘becoming a specialist made me feel worthy, but not powerful’. All participants monitored their language carefully, perhaps because as we stated above, they could possibly be identified. But we felt they also did this at times to avoid creating the impression of managerialist and hierarchical distinctions between themselves and colleagues and we say more about this below; the key point here, is Jackie’s juxtaposing of ‘worthy’ with ‘powerful’. Referring to the shifts in the ways research practitioners might see themselves, Jackie senses the danger of arrogance or haughtiness that practitioner researchers may be vulnerable to, understanding the potential to undermine important collegial relationships that are so important to their learning development. So Jackie elevates worthiness and ethical practice above hubris, revealing the tensions she grapples with between the growing influence of her research practice, and the notions of how any assignment of power to that research is seen within the school hierarchy. We will return to this idea in the next section.

Clearly, PR made a contribution to the ways participants saw themselves at work. This is evidenced above and by the excitement they expressed about PR as an activity that allowed them to explore their day to day classroom lives, rather than just being swept along by the frantic day to day pace of school life. In this way, PR enriched their vocational experience and move them toward Dewey’s notion of the aesthetic, referred to at the

beginning of this paper. An additional development of their teacher identities is the excitement participants revealed about generating wider influence beyond one to one encounters with colleagues. They were enthusiastic about the more expansive aspects of their project articles. Sue for example, referred to a 'snowball' effect which took her practitioner research beyond her department into the wider school community: 'The power of other people can take your project in a direction that you wouldn't have thought'. Here, Sue hints at the potential of practitioner research to flow through a school, gathering influence and momentum as it changes hands. David highlighted a further valuable influence of PR on PGCE students and NQTs and Hamida takes the snowball metaphor further and celebrates research projects spreading beyond Oak Tree to other schools through conferences and the school's in-house publications opportunity. Finally, Sue captures the importance of organic growth that was generally common to all participants' approaches to teacher learning and PR: 'You have to try and convince...you have to prove or plant something...'. Our participants felt that PR had the potential to seed teacher growth through the synthesis of wider evidence, data collection from learners and teachers and a heightened enthusiasm for and commitment to seeing under and around the day to day, generating a richer vocational experience for themselves and their colleagues.

Teacher Learning - Collegiality and Leadership

Leadership has long been the mantra of performative 'school improvement' agendas alongside an adjectival obsession with 'strong' and 'weak'. Consequently, as Gagnon and Collinson (2014) comment, identity formations in leadership are significantly underplayed, sometimes in favour of the competency frameworks popular with some training organisations. In this research, interpretations of leadership, collegiality, and PR formed interesting and complex tensions. Despite their profile as pedagogic innovators, our participants were reluctant to see themselves as leaders; or at least, they were certainly reluctant to use that word. There were three main reasons for this. Firstly, the friction between collegiality and notions of leadership. Most participants felt that adopting the label of 'leader' would undermine the unity they felt with other teachers and they valued collegiality above leadership as a mode of working to encouraging teacher learning. David comments: 'my view would be to be wary about the word leadership in relationship to the IU.... I think we're colleagues who have got some ideas'. Here David clearly underplays the IU members' skills and expertise perhaps to protect the collegial nature of their work. Collegiality in tension with leadership was clear from four of the seven participants' responses. In different ways, all participants highly valued aspects of collegiality as a potent force for learning. Hamida commented:

It's a really tight network at the school, to be honest, and I think that's a really good thing...that we're actually always teaching each other as we go along (9)

Also, in response to a question about how learning relationships are built, Jackie said:

Trust, trust and, trust that I'm doing the best, trust and sincerity.... if teachers kind of feel that I've got their best interests and I'm sincere enough about it, they normally come on board.

Jackie also said that leadership implied 'all commanding' (9) which was definitely not the way she wished to describe the working practices of IU members. David also comments that the view of the word 'leader' in the school referred to 'power and managing...that's just the culture we are in'. This raises the second point: some participants felt that if classroom innovators are regarded as leaders too, this could disrupt the clearly established leadership hierarchy in the school. David's comment above about 'power and managing the structures' suggest that innovators need to be outside traditional leadership hierarchies or their work could be misinterpreted as senior management 'messages' which again, might undermine the collegial nature of their influence. Furthermore, David also suggested teachers might react negatively to any 'line management' confusion around who the school leaders are and ask: 'hang on, have I got a new boss?' This kind of tentativeness about leadership was common to all participants; instead, they wanted to conceptualise IU membership as running parallel to formal leadership structures. They were clear that IU activity should be free from formal hierarchical structures. This is corroborated by the third issue: participants felt teacher learning was mainly facilitated by collegial guidance and learning in a trusted community. Participants valued collegial relationships for learning rather than rhetoric around leadership; especially the 'we are all leaders' refrain, which one participant referred to with a cynical smile. Instead, participants were much more focussed on what PR could achieve pedagogically without becoming entangled with the shadowy imperative of leadership. Sam for example was much more interested in 'the next ideas, the creativity'. David too was very focussed on exchanging ideas and thriving on having those conversations with people'. He also acknowledged the importance of 'chatting to a mate in the corridor'. Jackie also mentions how important this informal learning can be: '...the best way of improving pedagogy, is actually sitting around and having chit chat' (5). Informal opportunities for teacher learning clearly slide into the spaces around the busy formal events of a school day as unexpected but still influential encounters, particularly in the development of a trusted community of learning. These opportunities are often undervalued and indeed Jackie makes the comment that the change to a shorter lunch break may mean she has 'less time to talk' to colleagues. Participants were very aware that these informal, ad hoc opportunities could lead to change through 'example and not power' (David). When I asked Steve directly if he felt like a leader, he said: 'I wouldn't say....[hesitation] I'm always one of those who's willing to learn'. His hesitation and avoidance of a direct answer suggests again that the word 'leader' wasn't appropriate and interestingly he refers to being 'willing to learn' almost as an alternative to leadership. David was more willing to accept a role in leading pedagogy but he too was reluctant to offer a too simplified account: 'I don't know if I'd use the word pedagogy, or the word leading...'. This playful response led on to a more serious point; his colleagues sometimes actively seek out IU members to discuss classroom practice and the term 'leading' suggested to him a degree of power, control and directing which was certainly not his experience or how he saw his role in the IU. David's comments chime with others who linked notions of leadership with hierarchy and power, already mentioned above. The only participant to endorse the word leadership was Sue,

and she did so provisionally: 'I think you automatically feel like some sort of leader if you feel you can change something'. She followed up by defining leadership as 'being of use to others' and 'you don't feel like you're a leader, unless you've got something to offer'. So, the only participant to engage with the possibility that IU members might be pedagogic leaders, did so in terms of service to others and as an offering or contribution to the teacher community in the spirit of a vocation. So, even where one participant was willing to use the word 'leadership', it was in that instance, defined as a community value circumventing any suggestion that IU participants and the practitioner research they carried out, formed part of a formal school hierarchy. When Tom the SMT member commented on this he said that the IU group 'does lead teaching and learning within the school' but that as individuals 'they are innovators'. Again, this tentative linguistic gameplay, reveals a care to protect collegial relationships from misunderstandings related to hierarchy. Tom endorsed the collegial nature of IU colleagues and agreed that, with regard to pedagogic innovation, the school valued sharing ideas, taking pedagogic risks and exploring practice. Tom chose an interesting example to illustrate this:

...you know, you teach one class and it goes brilliantly, and then the next class come in and you might be doing the same thing and it would fall apart (p.20)

Here, Tom deftly captures the complex and fragile nature of the classroom experience to raise the tensions between pedagogic expertise, leadership and innovation. By framing classroom practice as unstable and vulnerable to change, Tom affirms that teacher learning is a fluid and iterative process of challenge and critical reflection. Endorsing the comments of his IU colleagues, Tom later comments, 'it's sharing, it's ideas, it's not telling you', sanctioning collegial values above power. Importantly, this approach should not be mistaken for a directionless 'anything goes' philosophy in the classroom. Tom makes it clear that firstly, the themes pursued by the IU are based around broad pedagogic challenges identified through senior strategic decision-making. Secondly, that the school sets a framework for priorities but that this framework is expansive and expects teachers to experiment:

I think it is... brave to try different things because, you know, often, it's the standard, isn't it, that everyone returns to. 'I've got to get this done. I've got to do this and I've got to do something else'. But really, it should be the key principles. You have to get two or three key principles across and different teachers have different ways of doing it'

This captures the ways teachers learn outside formal leadership structures, but inside the busy school day. Tom makes it clear there are principles by which teachers work, but at the same time - 'teachers have different ways of doing it' - he acknowledges the complexity and richness of the diverse social and cultural spaces teachers inhabit and learn in. Tom's SMT perspective acknowledges that genuine innovation requires the space to experiment and the acceptance of diversity which in turn demands a trusted and collegial community.

Finally, we should note that though our participants identified PR as an exciting and enriching experience, there was a cost to them. One participant mentioned 'huge time pressures' and how this can lead to 'getting caught up in your own little world', struggling to escape the day to day workload to think more broadly.

Others corroborated this feeling, finding it challenging to ‘create time for the Project’. Another mentioned the anxiety of innovation fatigue and running out of ideas. One participant commented: ‘I’ll have burnt myself out by forty’. These comments are not unusual from teachers in UK secondary schools; they are pressurised working environments, but they are also meant to be environments for growth and fulfilment and though PR clearly gave our participants these opportunities, they suggested there was fragility about the sustainability of their innovation work that meant they were, at least, unsure about the future.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research suggests that firstly, our participants saw PR as an activity which helped them live more fulfilled lives at work. They felt PR increased their confidence, expertise and enthusiasm at work. These aspects contributed to a shift in their identities and changed the ways they felt about themselves and how they were experienced by others. Goodnough (2011) and Wilkins (2011) also report these kinds of changes.

Secondly, participants felt PR created a context for collegial conversations about learning and teaching in and outside the school. They were clear about how informal and ad hoc conversations were meaningful and also how the IU provided a fertile space for innovation and risk taking; as Halsall (1998) comments, this kind of space takes ‘deliberate creation’ (30). Participants’ positions were interestingly coloured by their responses to questions about leadership. They felt that leadership was interpreted hierarchically and as a result, they worried that the important features of collegiality that the IU and PR cultivated (trust, collaboration and shared vision) were potentially undermined by notions of leadership. Tom, the SMT member endorsed these ideas and felt that for IU members, innovation was at least as important as leadership, if not more so. It was as if becoming a specialist and innovator, supporting others carried an ethical flavour, fulfilling a dimension of teacher identity that was not supported (and possibly undermined) by entanglements with notions of leadership and management. This at least begins to problematize understandings of leadership, suggesting the tensions that lie between teacher learning and innovation on one hand, and the perceived role of leadership on the other. This is not an argument against the importance of leadership but a validation of other powerful factors crucially important to teacher learning and a suggestion that perhaps leadership is sometimes over-valued in this field of enquiry.

Moving then to a broader, philosophical discussion of our findings, the outcomes above can be usefully explored by Fielding’s (2006) discussion of John Macmurray’s work on functional and personal relations. Fielding explains John Macmurray’s importance as a philosopher and considers the relationship between the individual and society. In particular, Fielding focuses on Macmurray’s consideration of functional and personal relationships. ‘Functional’ relationships are those that ‘help us to get things done’ (351) whereas ‘personal’ relationships exist ‘in order to help us be or become ourselves in and through relations with others’ (351). Fielding expands on Macmurray’s ideas:

Just as the personal needs the functional to realize itself in action, so too the functional needs some element of the personal to achieve its purposes. Except in very extreme cases which require us to act as if we were machines or adopt a rule which overrides the kind of personal engagement we have been alluding to, human beings' engagement in functional activity trades on their understanding that wider human purposes validate and animate their conduct, how they go about getting things done. (351-2)

The 'wider human purposes' to which Fielding refers, can be applied to question the ways in which notions of professionalism and leadership in schools are interpreted and negotiated. Our participants saw leadership for example as an interference to the ways in which they worked with colleagues. They tended to see leadership in functional terms that, to some extent, hindered the spirit of the collegial and personal relationships they believed were more successful for teacher learning. So while on the surface, the functional task of our participants could be redacted to 'staff development', what they valorise is the personal context of 'shared humanity' (351). This is what colours their labour with 'the moral and interpersonal' (353) which only seems to find its voice in the functions that bring people together. Our participants' contributions were often imbued with the moral over functional and the valorising of the interpersonal and so Macmurray's words help to connect this research to a wider context.

Another angle on the tensions outlined above is offered by Illich in Tools for Conviviality (1973):

...life in an industrialised society has made us place exaggerated value on standard products, uniformity and certified quality. Industrialised expectations have blurred the distinction between personal vocation and standard profession (Illich p.49).

Like MacMurray's discussion of the personal - Fielding (2006) refers to it broadly as 'what it is to be and become a person' (2006, 366) - Illich reminds us that a 'vocation' (such as teaching) is blurred by and in conflict with a standardising agenda. This is true of the current UK situation where teaching as a personal and collegial vocation and the neoliberal standards agenda frequently run alongside one another, to-ing and fro-ing in a complex policy and power dance. What is interesting about the IU however is the protected nature of the IU space. IU members are effectively licensed by the SMT to act in the spirit of teaching as a vocation, without significant influence of standardisation and certainly without the stigma of varying notions of leadership. Participants' comments suggest they have grown to work collegially, fostering a diffusion of pedagogic ideas which are backed up by some powerful practitioner research. Returning to Illich then, these qualities of the IU are, in our view, embraced by his notion of 'conviviality':

I choose the term "conviviality" to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value. (p.26)

Illich's description of conviviality provides a wide perspective from which to interpret our participants' words. Using this lens, the IU can be seen as a convivial space, capturing the complex coming together of person-centredness in a trusted ethical environment where practitioner research becomes a driver for dialogue and change. Seeing the IU in this way could help shape other teacher learning spaces where schools are looking for cultural shifts in teacher identity as alternatives to standardised and standardising 'CPD' programmes.

However, the IU is still an enclave and its members carry out PR and other IU responsibilities on top of their substantive posts. This has led to some clear anxieties from the participants about how much longer they can maintain the pace at which they work. So though we might identify the IU as a positive convivial space, it is not without cost to those involved and the resources secured to this space do not yet offer a clear and endorsed future. These kinds of challenges are not unusual in UK schools where the power of externally set targets pushes schools into spaces they may not chose for themselves.

In conclusion, we return to Dewey's comments at the start of this paper to set the outcomes into a broader vocational perspective. We have tried to establish how important aesthetic learning experiences are to creating positive learning environments for teachers and pupils. From our research, it seems that PR, nurtured in an identified space for innovation and collaboration does make a contribution to more fulfilled working lives for teachers, leading to a greater possibility of enriched and enriching classroom experiences.

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